

“WHERE TRUE JOY BEGINS”

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Moments ago I traced Luke’s version of Jesus of Nazareth born into this world. But have you heard the backstory of how the Christ came to be born among us?

God once gathered a council of heavenly angels before his throne to discuss a gravely important matter. Things below on earth weren’t going well. We humans manage to improve slightly, but then quickly seem to forget the better angels of our nature. Our darker impulses ever come into play as we become afraid. And as we grow fearful, we are not at our best. We blame each other and scapegoat. We falter as peacemakers before clashes. We lose hope. We forget to trust God.

So God huddled his angels around for a new plan to counter all of the trouble on earth—the fighting, the hoarding, the harshness, the hating, and the bloodshed. “I’ve tried everything,” God lamented. “Things were in chaos, so I gave them law, a new order. What did they do with my law?” “They reduced your bold new way in the world into little rules to evade and to trick each other with,” said one angel.

“Right,” said God. “Then I offered them gorgeous poetry to offset the ugliness of earth below. Like the Psalms. ‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, my cup runneth over...surely goodness and mercy shall follow me...and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever’...Like the wondrous hymns. ‘I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.’ What happened to that?” “They adore hearing of peace and forgiveness,” said another angel. “They send greeting cards with the sentiment. But when it’s their turn to forgive and reconcile, they refuse.”

“Right,” said God. “Then I sent them my prophets. These truth-tellers confronted the world’s lies, fearing no ruler or power regardless of threats to their well-being. ‘Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.’ What happened to my prophets?” “They were either ignored or stoned,” intoned yet another angel with great sadness, as though our last chance was now spent.

It created a stir in that council of angels. Many of them, like Michael and Gabriel, had been to earth. They knew first-hand what a dangerous place this globe can be. They’d witnessed the sources of God’s lament and shared all of his concern.

The Lord God drew a heavy sigh. “Clearly, the only thing left is for one of you, my heavenly court, to go down to earth. You cannot just swoop over top of them, however. You must live with them, exist right alongside them in their sorrows and joys, their hopes and fears. You must fully embrace them as one of them. You must get to know them living as one of them and let them get to know you in turn.

“Only then will they notice the great gap between heaven and earth, the divine image within which they’re made, and the mess they’re making of the good earth.

Only then will my intentions for their lives, singly and together, become clear. Only in this defining act can it be revealed anew who I have created them to be.”

Awkward silence followed God’s charge. Not one of them stirred--in the least. All eyes were downcast at the terrible immensity of the task. After all, they’d been to earth to deliver messages, or to effect small turns in human dealings. They knew earth as dangerous. They projected this duty as thankless. Each angel measured God’s words knowing they would cost them everything. So none offered to serve.

The silence seemed to last an eternity. Finally, God himself broke their silence. Quietly, determinedly, but without any resignation or bitterness, God said, “I’ll go.”

Now we can rightly see the scene in Luke when the angel of the Lord appeared before scattered shepherds in the cold and wet fields, keeping watch by night. The glory of the Lord illumined their faces and the ethereal display overwhelmed and terrified the lowly herders. But the angel of the Lord said, “Do not be afraid. This show of the Lord’s power and presence is not a bad thing. It’s a good thing.”

Why such an over-the-top display to a field of nobodies? They couldn’t go to Herod. God saw him as the problem. Commoners, like shepherds, were the answer.

Luke writes suddenly with the angel was a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and singing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those he favors!” Carnegie Hall would have been humbled by that chorus. And if you closely examined those angel faces, you’d see tears running down cheeks. For they knew, with God reconciling in Jesus Christ, he took their place and ours. Friends, this is where the joy of Christmas truly begins. This is why we celebrate.

Pastor? Yes, Gary? **I’m not sure we’ve heard your message.** What do you mean? Everyone listened closely to what I just said. And their hearts seem ready for joy. **Yes, all that is true. But I look at our communion table and I see a lot of gifts flowing back and forth among us. But nothing refers the gift of God from above to us.**

I see your point, Gary. And you are good to raise it. Why don’t you remove them for later then, when we’re done praising God. But what can we put in their place? **It’s not a problem, Pastor. Look what we’re finding underneath.** Umm. What is it? **Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were waiting for us here the whole time.** Interesting. But our presents blinded us to the one gift that matters. Is that it? **Yes, I think it is.**

I have an idea. We grownups keep messing things up. What if we give our children something to put on their parents presents to remind us of where joy begins. **That’s an excellent idea. I have something to give them at the door as they leave.** Amen.